

“Excavating the City of the Snake Goddess: Tell Nabasha” Dr Nicky Nielsen
(August 2024)

Dr Nicky Nielsen from Manchester University, Director of the Tell Nabasha Survey Project, was just about to return to the site after his talk to us following a number of years' absence. He started by giving us a lot of information about the history of explorations of the site. There are a number of reasons for the site not being well known. It is in the delta which was not seen as important in the nineteenth century and there was confusion about its name. Petrie named it Tell Nabasha after a local sheik. In ancient times it was called Imet.

Petrie was working at nearby Tanis when he heard of remains at the site, particularly a large 'stone'. He found a Roman town, temples and an enclosure wall. The temples are dedicated to the snake goddess, Wadjet, and her consort, The 'stone' proved to be a broken monolithic shrine from the time of Amases II of the 21st Dynasty. He also found a large cemetery with 4-5000 tombs, most of which is now under the modern town.

The large number of objects which he found (statues, a sphynx, vessels, jewellery) is now scattered through 40 museums or collections). Occasional finds emerge from the houses which now cover much of the site. A school overlooks the area and Dr Nielsen 'got into trouble' with the headteacher when he was last there as the children were more interested in what they could see of his activities out of the windows than their lessons.



The sphynx now in Boston Museum of Fine Arts

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In the cemetery Petrie found ceramic coffins as well as shabtis and vessels. He also found metal objects which he decided came from Cyprus and were proof of Cypriote mercenaries having been in the area. The objects which he decided were 'spear butts' are probably part of sticks and sceptres. This is a good example of how spurious deductions can be made from so little evidence. The water table in the area is high so very few human remains were found but Petrie did find 4 bodies.

In studying the site, Dr Neilson wants to review the materials found by earlier excavations and survey the site. During the construction of the modern school walls and firepits were found. The tell itself is a mass of accumulated matter

including mud bricks. Experienced excavators are able to 'hear' the difference between the matrix and mud bricks as they sound different when tapped.

Discoveries in previous seasons include a firepit with a late period cooking pot standing in it which suggests a rapid abandonment of the settlement. The site stands on the route which Alexander the Great's army took from Pelusium to Memphis. Could news of his approach have caused the inhabitants to flee?

There was also a bas relief of Harpocrates, the child Horus, with a piece missing. Was it thrown away because it was broken? Does it suggest the presence of a temple to the young Horus? It would be good to find the missing piece.

Plans for the 2024 season include using satellite images to reveal signs of areas which might have been kilns and then excavating in these areas. There are Old Kingdom references to wine production in the area. Kilns which have already been discovered are 3 meters in diameter. Were they used to fire amphora for the transport of wine?

Members asked these questions:

How were pottery coffins made?

In sections which were then fitted together

Why did the skeletons survive?

They were buried just above the ground water

Does the British Museum hold items?

Yes, it has a varied collection which represents the full range of items discovered at the site though the Boston Museum of Fine Arts has more aesthetically pleasing items.

Alison Woollard